

“Spicy and Thick”

Mark 3: 20–35

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Last year, the head of my former stewardship committee stood before the congregation with a message to kick off the stewardship campaign. Don't worry, this is not a special stewardship sermon. In my world, they are all stewardship sermons. Matt stood up and said, "I want to thank Dr. McDonald for something he said 10 years ago." I was stunned. He quoted me verbatim from something I had said a decade earlier. I did not remember that I had said that. I don't remember what I had for breakfast. Once he said it, I got kind of excited. I had planted a seed that had been germinating for 10 years, and it finally broke through!

We plant, God gives the growth. It is true for all of us as people of faith. Our call from God is to plant. The words we use, the stories we tell, the dreams we share, the financial gifts we give, the ideas we fling out into the universe. That is our part. We plant. God gives the growth. So we do our part. Then we relax. Not get lazy. A farmer may plant seeds, but they still have to plow, fertilize, water. We do our part. We have to speak up. Stand up for those values. Act out.

Then, we loosen up. The theological term we are exploring is providence. The mystery and wonder of God taking care of us. We relax because we remember: God gives the growth. We let our lives be dominated by a sense of... trust.

Mustard seed: These are like flecks of pepper. Tiny. But they grow.

We think the little things do not matter. We say to ourselves, "Well, it was just a small thing. I won't mention it. Who am I to say anything? What would I have to offer? What could I do?"

We plant, God gives the growth. We plant the small things. The Parable of the Mustard Seed. The Bible is funny. Mark was the first one to write down this parable. When Matthew and Luke went to write their version of the gospel, they had the gospel of Mark sitting right in front of them. Sometimes they quote him verbatim. But when it came to this passage, they could not go where Mark went. Matthew and Luke say: You plant the mustard seed and it grows into the biggest tree in the forest! Bigger is better. Frankly, sometimes that is true. But Mark had a different message, an alternative theology. Mark: you plant the mustard seed, And it produces, what? Mustard is more like a patch of tumble weed. At most a medium size bush a few feet high. Trust me, no eagle has ever nested in a mustard bush. No vulture, no crow.

But here is the genius of the mustard plant: Once you plant it, it reproduces like wildfire. It is prolific. It will take over your garden. It gets thick, dense, and it spreads. The birds that find shelter in this bramble of mustard plants are the little ones, the vulnerable ones. They find shelter from the sun, the rain. Out of view of prying eyes. In the bramble of the mustard bush, they rest, relax, build their nest. It is not that it is a brick fortress that protects them. It is not even a tree. It is that if a predator comes, they flit, they hop, they move among the bushes. A little noise, a movement in the bushes, the birds are aware.

They can protect themselves by moving about, Darting here and there in the brambles, and if need be, to simply fly away until the threat has passed. Then they fly back to their little bushy home. All the birds really need is a warning, an awareness. God protects us by making us aware. Aware that we are loved. Aware of the grace God gives us. Aware of the possibilities for life God gives. And yes, Aware that there are ways of living that can be destructive. Aware that there are values that can be destructive. Aware of things we need to avoid.

This is a vision of God's providence that is born not of arrogance but of humbleness, humility, freedom. Instead of Singing: "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," We ought to sing: "A Thick and Spicy Mustard Bush is Our God." Sometimes it is helpful to think about God In terms that have to do less with invulnerability and more with grace. That have to do less with arrogance and more with humbleness. That have less to do with the power to force and coerce, And more with the power of the cross, which is the power of vulnerable love. Like birds in a mustard bush – God helps make us sensitive and aware to the world around us.

Mustard seeds are tiny. Like Flecks of pepper. A reminder of a humble saying: Good things come in small packages. We so often dream of doing big things. Things that are big, ideal, and perfect. Sometimes, we want it all perfect, right away. Matthew 5: 48 is often translated: "Be ye perfect as your father in heaven is perfect." So began a generation of people in need of therapy. That passage is better translated: Be ye whole as your father in heaven is whole. Wholeness is an image of shalom. God does not want us to expect ourselves to be perfect, but to grace us with lives of wholeness, of peace, of shalom.

Kennon Callahan says there is a danger in "learned perfectionism." "Parents who were simply trying to be good parents and who likely learned it from their parents, who kept saying, "You can do better." A teacher who tried to cause us to strive for our best. A compulsiveness toward perfectionism causes us to set too many objectives too high to be accomplished too soon. This causes us to postpone action. We postpone action in order to postpone failure." "Procrastination is the symptom, not the cause." (Callahan, Twelve Keys for Living, p. 121-3, Jossey-Bass.)

NPR story awhile back: Olympic caliber runner was having trouble. Kept losing races. Came to her coach: "Coach, I'm running as hard as I can. Honest, I'm giving it 110 percent effort." Every time she would lose, she'd say, "Coach, I'm giving it 110 percent." Finally, the coach said: How about, instead of giving 110 percent, you just give 90. Relax a bit." The runner did, and started to win.

Stop worrying about being perfect. Instead, just think about making progress. Remember: A Journey of a thousand miles begins with putting on your socks. One sock at a time. Then see what comes next.

Have you ever worked in an office where they compete with who can put in the most hours? They compete with who can be the most neurotic. I commend to you the practice that on many days when the clock strikes 5, stand up from your desk, find one of your colleagues, and say to them, "It's 5:00. I'm declaring victory and going home."

Go home. Plant some of those seeds of faith, hope and love with your family and friends. Relax. Then come back the next day refreshed and ready to go. It will change your life.

Mustard seed: It's a small thing: Plant the seeds that matter, then remember we plant, God gives the growth.

This is the Parable of the Mustard seed: Not soybeans. Not raspberries. Not Mustard. Mustard is Spicy. It has: Zest. Fire. Taste. Punch. God's providence has to do with a life that is Spicy. Zesty. Has some fire in it.

Sometimes we act as if God is about tamping down our emotions. Making us good, quiet little boys and girls sitting up straight with our hands folded on the desk. Which is to say passive.

As Garrison Keillor talked about Mournful Oatmeal: "Mournful Oatmeal: It's the cereal that reminds you that you've never gotten what you really want. And that even if you did, you wouldn't like it. Mournful Oatmeal: It's almost like Calvinism in a box."

God's kingdom is a spicy place. With some fire, passion.

Did you ever go to a church meeting and want to reach over to the person next to you and touch their wrist to see if there is a pulse?

God's providence is about passion. Where you can feel the fire. I went to the House of Hope Peace and Justice meeting this week. My word! Talk about life! There are some many needs in the world. And these people are on fire to do something! Hunger, Homelessness, Climate Change, Sexism, Racism, the list goes on and on! What can I say.... this is a spicy church!

The House of Hope is the home for the largest gathering of AA in the twin cities. Alcoholics Anonymous was in its early days, Bill W and Dr. Bob Gathered about 100 of the earliest recovering alcoholics to put together a charter. To turn their group into an organization. To get organized. They started with the rules. They moved into the regulations. They decided upon the requirements of membership. They laid down the stipulations, policies and procedures. By the time they were finished, they had 62 rules and regulations, conditions and stipulations, policies and procedures.

They stepped back and looked at it, and collectively realized they had turned their addiction for alcohol into an addiction for rules. They all laughed and proposed another rule. Rule 63: We will not take ourselves too seriously. Then they scrapped the other 62 rules. And said, whoever wants to be a member therefore is a member. It is liberating to be able to not take yourself too seriously. It allows you to bond together more easily with other people. There are all sorts of personal growth gurus who will tell you: 37 secrets of success, [5 Habits of Highly Successful People](#), 6 Secrets to Happiness, 10 Habits of 5 Billionaires.

We Presbyterians have one major goal in life, the secret to success. It's in The Westminster Confession, which asks the question of the purpose/meaning of human life: The answer is, "The chief end of human life is to love God and enjoy God forever."

Love and joy found in the love of God and neighbor: the goal of human life. Love God. Practice now. We have got to practice that love as we go. If we are loving the wrong things, we are not practicing for our most important goal.

If you love your country, but end up tearing children from their parents' arms, then you are not loving your neighbor as yourself. Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. Enjoy God forever. Joy is our goal. Practice now.

Loosen up. Lighten up. Let go. Plant what matters most. Then trust. God gives the growth.

House of Hope is an amazing church with an amazing history. I want to start hearing and sharing more about that history. But also to say, where do we need to loosen up? Where do we need to let go? Sometimes, the only way to do something new is to stop doing something old. Enjoy what has been done. Celebrate it. Then say, now it is time for a new day.

Mustard seeds are prolific. The bushes grow together in a thick bramble. The idea of thickness made me think of an article by New York Time columnist David Brooks not long ago. "How to Leave a Mark on People." It is a profound article; I commend it to you.

In the column he talks about a friend, Joe, a firefighter who died fighting a fire. Brooks wrote about how many lives Joe had touched. Brooks had known him working together at a summer camp in Connecticut called Incarnation. Somebody posted on Facebook a picture of Joe in the middle of 250 other people from the camp, and wrote at the bottom, "Family."

Brooks writes, "Some organizations are thick, and some are thin. Some leave a mark on you, and some you pass through with scarcely a memory. He wrote, "I haven't worked at Incarnation for 30 years, but it remains one of the four or five thick institutions in my life, and so many other lives."

A thin institution is all about the horizontal values. The dominant question is, what's in it for me? What can I get out of this organization? When you don't get enough out of the organization, you fade out or move on. It has very limited meaning. Those are the forgettable places and people.

A thick institution becomes part of who you are. It engages the whole you. Heart, head, hands, soul. With thick institutions, you see each other often. You spend time together working on things together, supporting each other, helping each other's lives become fuller, more flavorful. You spend so much time together, you end up revealing your real self, and discovering that when you are really you, people don't go running screaming into the distance; they accept you for you and they are real in return.

Thick institutions are part of a sacred story. They celebrate their stories, they celebrate their heroes, and they celebrate shared values. Brooks says thick institutions sing together, because it is hard not to be bonded with someone when you sing the same songs. They speak the same language, they are animated by the same passions. They remember, they relish the passion, they feel the bonds together.

A church like House of Hope is, if we let it be so, a thick institution, and something like that mustard bush in Jesus' parable. We spend time planting the seeds of faith. In God's grace, they grow. It becomes a thick institution as we speak to one another in the vocabulary of grace, and sing our songs celebrating this God whom we trust. In the love of others, we experience a sense of protection. It may not be the biggest tree in the forest, but we share in the activities that take care of the little ones, both inside and outside of the church. We experience signs of the kingdom of God in the thicket of these people and their faithful practices. This place, this people – shape lives in profound ways. And like the birds in the parable, we find ourselves at peace, living in the providence of God – in a faithful culture that is thick and spicy.

Amen.